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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004155

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SUBJECT: ARTICLE 140: VIEWS FROM THE ERBIL STREET

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Greg D'Elia for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team message.

¶1. (C) Summary: according to a variety of sources, eventual implementation of Article 140 is an important and emotional issue for the &Erbil Street,8 but the delay will not trigger strong public reaction, despite KRG leadership claims over the past months. RRT does not expect any significant protests as the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) reconvenes in last week of December to (presumably) endorse the KRG leadership,s support for the UN proposal to a six-month delay and UN technical assistance. Any protests would be engineered by the main parties and not reflect immediate concerns of most people, which center on jobs and public services. The relative public silence may also reflect continued faith in their political leaders, ability to navigate the Article 140 process to a successful and just resolution. End Summary.

Article 140: Top priority for KRG leadership...

¶2. (U) Kurdish political leadership remains intensely focused on the Article 140 process. The KRG,s website faithfully documents the work of Mohammed Ihsan, KRG representative to the Article 140 committee, and his efforts to push the process forward. KRG President Masoud Barzani and KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani routinely deliver speeches, either wholly or at least in part on Article 140, in venues ranging from the inauguration of the United Nations compound to meetings with high school students. Other senior KRG officials, including KNA Deputy Speaker Kemal Kerkuki and KRG Presidency Council representative on Article 140 Qadir Aziz, regularly feature in Article 140 news. Every Kurdish newspaper publishes articles and editorials on the 140 process daily. (Note: Most Kurdish newspapers are KDP or PUK organs. There were unconfirmed reports that Kurdish newspaper editors agreed six months ago to devote one page each day in their newspapers to Article 140. End Note.)

...but little evident public concern

¶3. (C) Over the past two months, RRTOffs have questioned students, villagers, working-level ministry officials, and international and local NGO staff on their opinions about Article 140. Contrary to KRG leadership claims that the Kurdish street could react violently to a delay, most Kurdish contacts say that while Article 140 implementation is important, a delay would not deeply upset Erbil residents. Discussions also focus almost exclusively on Kirkuk, as the average persons understanding of Article 140 appears limited to whether or not Kirkuk will join the KRG. Although anecdotal, the responses received were almost universally neutral on the likely referendum delay. Summarized below are

discussions held in the past two months:

-- At the Erbil International Trade Fair October 30, Kurdish businessmen that RRTOff approached on article 140 expressed concern about Turkish ambitions in Kirkuk, but not about a delay. Article 140 must be resolved at some point, noted Mohammed Ali Khaldoun, a Kurdish businessman employed by American Company AZKU Inc. He added that all Iraqis, not only Kurds, would join the fight against Turkish intervention. Rebaz Zedbagi, deputy C.E.O. for Senk Group, a Kurdish construction company, replied that Article 140 is a political issue, and does not concern business and economic interests. (Note: These discussions took place at the height of the recent tension between Turkey and Iraq over the PKK. End note.)

-- On visits to Erbil province villages October and November, villagers had limited opinions on Article 140, with the conversation quickly turning to brutality suffered by their villages under the Anfal campaign. Water, electricity and housing were their top priorities.

-- KNA member (KDP) and practicing obstetrician, Aryan Al-Barzani told RRTOff on December 6 that although the KNA would debate Article 140 the next day, she had no strong opinion on a referendum delay.

-- On December 10 two RRTOffs held a question and answer session with over 100 students at Salahaddin University. Although they took questions for over an hour, no students asked about Article 140.

-- Kurdistan University professor Denise Natali told RRTOffs December 11 that her students had expressed no interest in

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Article 140. Their main concerns are finding jobs upon graduation, she said, and that their discouragement over the corrupt KDP and PUK patronage networks is palpable. The greatest concern among Kurds, she added, is KRG pressure for Kurds originally from Kirkuk to return against their wishes.

-- Ayad Sediq Khalid, NGO activist employed by the American Society for Kurds, told RRTOff December 12 that an Article 140 delay would have limited impact in Erbil. He noted that a political discussion was necessary, and that the Kurdish leadership would find a solution.

Comment

¶4. (C) Kirkuk and Article 140 remain strong emotional issues, and most Kurds believe they need resolution of the historic injustice Kurds suffered. The apparent apathy towards an Article 140 delay may belie an engrained Kurdish trust in the Kurdish leadership to navigate the Article 140 process to a peaceful and just solution. To date the parties have led their region through contentious issues ranging from constitutional deliberations to oil contracts. If a political agreement to resolve the process is not achieved during the first six months of 2008, Kurdish faith in the leadership's ability to protect their interests and rights may diminish. It could also increase criticism, particularly within the PUK, from the PUK reformists which to date the parties have shown little willingness to tolerate.

¶5. (C) KDP and PUK do have the ability to mobilize party members to take to the streets; both parties organized demonstrations October 21 to protest the Turkish parliament decision to authorize a military incursion into Iraq. In the RRTs opinion, the two parties would have to engineer any demonstration or mass response in Erbil or Sulimaniyah to a referendum delay. This contradicts the oft-heard refrain from KRG officials that they would not be able to control the streets. End Comment.

